Volume 1 • Number 1 • November 7, 2000

Schoolscapes
The Newsletter

# Draft Policy on the Evaluation of Student Learning: Issues and Challenges

By Eve Krakow

**Since the beginning of the school year, there has been much talk about report cards, marks, end-of-cycle evaluation, progress reports, and so on. Margaret Rioux-Dolan, head of the Direction de la formation générale des jeunes, outlined the main points of the *Draft Policy on the Evaluation of Student Learning*, as well as the main challenges that lie ahead in this area.**

"I think we should first remember that the report card is part of a process of evaluation of student learning, and situate it within the context of the draft policy which is now being submitted for consultation," said Ms. Rioux-Dolan.

This draft policy is the result of a process carried out over 1999-2000, which involved representatives throughout the education community, in both the English and French sectors, public and private: heads of educational services at school boards, coordinators, school principals, teachers, educational consultants, parents, university professors and representatives from the departments concerned within the Ministère de l'Éducation.

The draft policy is designed for the youth, adult and vocational education sectors. "We respected the major orientations of the different education sectors so as to have a coherent policy that is related to the major orientations of the Reform in both the youth and adult sectors, but also to those of the reform that took place a few years ago in vocational education," Ms. Rioux-Dolan explained.

The draft policy provides the historical background to the current Reform, the scope of the policy, its objectives, the evaluation process and its functions, its underlying values, the orientations, principles and guidelines for evaluation, and the roles and responsibilities of the partners involved.

## Background and scope

Evaluation of student learning in Québec has gone through three main periods in its evolution: evaluation of knowledge acquisition, evaluation of the degree of mastery of specified objectives, and evaluation of competencies.

"Since the publication of the *General Policy for Educational Evaluation* in 1981, significant improvements have been observed in the evaluation practices used by teachers. However, there is still room for additional improvements," said Ms. Rioux-Dolan.

This policy concerns the students, school teams, cycle teams and program teams, parents (as the partners of schools and vocational education centres), certain staff members of school boards and private schools, the members of governing boards, and businesses involved in general education in the adult sector and in vocational education.

It also informs community organizations, certain staff members at the college level, and university professors responsible for training future teachers.

## Objectives

The draft policy's objectives are, first, to specify the values, orientations, principles and guidelines governing the evaluation of competencies, the recognition of competencies, and the recognition of prior scholastic and experiential learning.

"A second objective is to reaffirm the importance of evaluation and the necessity of ensuring consistency with programs of study," she said. "In the educational policy *Québec Schools on Course*, the evaluation of student learning is considered a central component of the curriculum. The present draft policy gives it a central role with other elements which, although not new, give it more emphasis in order to help students achieve success."

The draft policy also aims to promote ongoing evaluation as a daily tool to encourage the development of competencies in students, and to assign roles and responsibilities in matters of evaluation.

## The evaluation process

"Evaluation of student learning is a process that involves making a judgment about the development and acquisition of competencies in order to make decisions," Ms. Rioux-Dolan explained. The evaluation process is divided into five stages: planning, information gathering, interpretation, judgment, and communication of results. "These stages are essential for ensuring a fair and equitable evaluation.' Evaluation should be planned at the same time as teaching and learning activities.

Information is gathered on the way in which a task is performed, as well as on the results obtained once the task has been performed.

Interpretation "may involve comparing results with the expectations stated in the program (known as criterion-referenced interpretation). It may also involve comparing the student's results at different stages in his or her learning (known as self-referencing interpretation). Finally, it may include norm-referenced interpretation, which means comparing the student's results with those of the group—not to rank the students, but for placement or selection purposes. This is used particularly at the secondary level."

The next stage, the whole question of judgment, will require particular emphasis in the implementation of the Reform, she said. "The importance of the teacher's professional judgment in relation to the evaluation process is a vital aspect in order to give parents and students an accurate picture."

The last stage is one of communication: providing information to parents and students. "This must be done using clear and simple language that is meaningful to the parents reading it." The report card must present concise information adapted to a general public. "The idea is not only to give parents an overall picture of their child's progress, but also to get their collaboration in supporting their child," she said. The information given should also help engage students in their learning process.

## Functions of evaluation

The orientations of the education reform assign four specific functions to the evaluation of student learning. The first, fundamental to the Reform, is the assistance with learning. "It is important to provide feedback to guide students in modifying their learning strategies," Ms. Rioux-Dolan explained.

Another function is the recognition of competencies, carried out at the end of a cycle in general education in the youth sector, at the end of a course in general education in the adult sector, and at the end of a module in vocational education. Recognition of prior scholastic and experiential learning, carried out as needed, takes place in general education in the adult sector and vocational education. Finally, certification of studies takes place at the end of the studies.

## Values

"In a policy on student learning, in order to be able to treat students equally and fairly, we need certain underlying values," she said. Chapter V of the draft policy describes the values on which the evaluation of student learning is based.

## Orientations

"The orientations enable us to see where we want to go with the evaluation of student learning," Ms. Rioux-Dolan stated. To begin with, the evaluation of student learning must help achieve the goal of educational success. "This links the assistance with learning function and teachers' observations or information gathering so as to help students improve their learning strategies, and to help teachers modify their teaching practices in order to foster success."

The evaluation of student learning must also be based on the teacher's professional judgment. "It is an important pedagogical action. We can't just add up the data. We need to process this information to give students an overall report of their progress in class."

A third orientation is that the evaluation of learning must promote the use of high-quality writing in the language of instruction. "High-quality writing must be a focus for all teachers, in all subjects and at all times, including evaluation."

Finally, the fourth orientation states that the evaluation of learning must safeguard the social value of official documents. Official documents must in all cases be issued in accordance with the requirements set out in the Basic

2007-02865/

School Regulations, and must be issued following an evaluation of learning based on uniform standards.

## Major Challenges

Ms. Rioux-Dolan emphasized five major challenges in the evaluation of student learning: coherence, exercising judgment, communication with parents and students, and training.

"From the beginning, we have tried to establish a close link between teaching, learning and evaluation. This is not meant to be a pious wish, but should be integrated into our teaching practices on a daily basis."

However, it is upon implementing the evaluation practices in classrooms in the coming months that we will be able to observe, verify and validate them, she said.

Another challenge is the exercising of judgment in evaluation. From now on, teachers will have to use a more global and integrated approach in evaluation. "This is essential in order to be able to attain our objective of justice and equality for all students. However, it will require intensive support."

Communication with parents and students will be another real challenge. Finally, initial and continuous training is essential to provide guidance to the school teams, and to help educators develop the professional competencies needed to meet this challenge: to implement the Reform with success for all!

***The principles below apply equally in general education in the youth and adult sectors and in vocational education. However, some guidelines relate to evaluation practices that are specific to a particular sector.***

### Principle of evaluation as an integral part of learning

Evaluation activities must be planned at the same time as teaching activities.

Evaluation carried out during the development of competencies must focus on the result obtained and the learning strategies used by the student.

During the learning process, the teacher's judgment concerning the development of competencies must be based on a self-referenced or criterion-referenced interpretation.

Evaluation of the acquisition of the competencies must be based on a criterion-referenced interpretation.

The frequency of communication with parents is prescribed by the Basic School Regulation. However, the communication must be planned to occur at appropriate and significant times in the development of competencies during a cycle.

### Principle of student participation in evaluating the development of a competency

During the learning process, evaluation must encourage students to become involved and take on responsibility.

Evaluation of a student's learning must allow the student to reflect on his or her learning strategies.

### Principle of respect for difference and diversity

During the learning process, evaluation situations must take into account the fact that not all students learn at the same pace and in the same way.

Learning must be evaluated in such a way that cultural references do not give some students an advantage over others.

### Principle of conformity with the programs

A judgment made concerning the acquisition of competencies at the end of a cycle must be based on information gathered at different times and in different contexts.

Evaluation of the acquisition of competencies at the end of a cycle must focus on the performance of an individual student, even if the evaluation involves teamwork.

Evaluation of the acquisition of a competency (toward the end of a cycle, course or module) must draw on the methods and strategies used in complex, contextualized tasks. However, during the course of learning, simple tasks may also be used.

Evaluation of the development or acquisition of competencies must provide an opportunity to verify whether the student can apply the knowledge and competencies to perform a task within or outside the school setting.

In distance or home education, the evaluation focuses and criteria must be the same as those used in schools, and the evaluation conditions must be comparable.

At the end of a cycle, evaluation must focus on the degree to which the competencies have been acquired.

### Principle of collaboration

In distance or home education, acquisition of a competency must be evaluated at the school or centre concerned.

A judgment made by a teacher concerning the acquisition of competencies must take into account the judgments made by the members of the cycle team and, if applicable, the information provided by other stakeholders.

When a student is promoted from one cycle to the next, the cycle team must provide information that the team for the following cycle can use to define assistance or enrichment measures for the student as required.

### Principle of compliance with rules of ethics

It must be possible to obtain a sufficient number of relevant elements during the information gathering stage.

The students must be aware of the procedure and criteria used in the evaluation of learning.

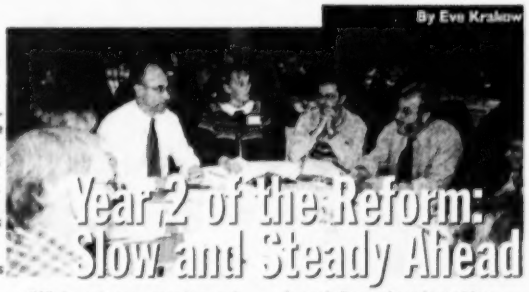
The student or the student's parents, where applicable, are entitled to be made aware of the information used to make a judgement concerning the student's learning.

Teachers and the other stakeholders involved in evaluation must keep up to date in the area of evaluation of student learning.

### Principle of certification of studies safeguarding the social value of official documents

The State certifies secondary studies in general education in the youth and adult sectors and in vocational education by issuing an official document to every person who has met the conditions prescribed by the Basic School Regulations.

By Eve Krakow



# Year 2 of the Reform: Slow and Steady Ahead

"All the resistance, opposition and criticism surrounding the Reform has crystallized around the evaluation," said Robert Bisaillon, assistant deputy minister for preschool, elementary and secondary education, on the first day of the Rencontre nationale.

In his opening address, Mr. Bisaillon began by situating the evaluation of learning—the focus of the two-day session—within the context of not only the implementation of the Reform, but also the conflictual reaction to the Reform among schools and the general public.

"This aspect, which we had perhaps neglected so far, is catching up with us," he said.

"When the school year began, all the questions about the Reform suddenly focused on evaluation—both the evaluation of learning, because of discussions on the report cards, and the evaluation of institutions, because of the recent ranking of secondary schools."

Mr. Bisaillon acknowledged several legitimate concerns, however.

"There are concerns that the evaluation of learning, whatever shape it may take, won't give an accurate picture of students' progress, or not in terms that parents will understand."

He said that these were some of the issues he hoped participants would reflect on over the two days.

"What we're experiencing today is a clash between two ways of thinking, two trends that we usually see as opposites: giving all students an equal chance for success, and performance. As if one must preclude the other!"

## A need for integration and reconciliation

The task that lies ahead is therefore one of integration and reconciliation, "while avoiding the traps of abusive language, heinous comparisons and simplistic shortcuts."

He said that for the first time, schools are creating a culture of evaluation, using targets and means they have chosen themselves instead of having them imposed from outside.

Echoing an opinion already voiced by many, Mr. Bisaillon said that evaluation is the key that will either make or break the Reform.

"The evaluation of learning is the reef upon which the ship of the Reform could be shipwrecked. This is what I see from public opinion."

He said this reveals the overlapping distribution of powers among the different levels and actors within the system (i.e. who is responsible for what, such as in the case of report cards).

"It is also highly revealing of the difficult demands of teacher autonomy and professional judgement in a culture ... that judges the value of things through quantitative measuring."

He pointed out that 10 to 12 percent of students currently leave the system "as if they had never even gone through it." Because they fail or drop out and have no diploma, none of the knowledge acquired in their 10 or 12 years of school is recognized.

Yet does recognizing the learning that each student has acquired mean levelling off to the lowest common denominator, and preventing others from exceeding expectations?

"I do not think so," said Mr. Bisaillon, "but we're in a harsh society, where people seem to think that giving everyone an equal chance means taking possibilities away from others."

We will not achieve the goals of imparting knowledge, fostering social development and giving qualifications by excluding students, he said, but rather, by recognizing what each student has accomplished. "We need to communicate this to parents."

What's more, one shouldn't think that the components of a child's development can be summed up in a report card, he added.

Mr. Bisaillon expressed the hope that participants would come out of the two-day session with a clearer idea of where we are headed, and a sense of solidarity in the face of the challenges to come.

## Lower the pressure

He stressed the need for people to "take the time to take their time," recognizing that teachers and administrative personnel are very tired. "We need to calm down. We need to lower the pressure. Otherwise we're going to create a wall that will be impossible to surmount."

At the same time, he said, it is important to be aware of the work that is beginning at the secondary level, and changes that are being planned in teacher training.

To conclude, Mr. Bisaillon stated that he hoped these two days would serve to reconcile the *Québec Education Program* and the evaluation of learning, to respond to the concerns of parents and the public who are worried about corners being cut on evaluation, and to move forward on solid ground.

***Schoolscapes, The Newsletter* is published by the preschool, elementary and secondary education sector.**
Robert Bisaillon
Assistant Deputy Minister

**Direction des services à la communauté anglophone**
Elaine Freeland,
Assistant Deputy Minister

**Direction des politiques et des projets**
Barbara Goode

**Direction de la production en langue anglaise**
Liette Michaud-Hedge

**With the cooperation of:**
Direction de la formation générale des jeunes
Margaret Rioux-Dolan
Director

**Claude Giroux**
Assistant Director

**Jean-Yves Daigle**
Editor-in-chief

**Eve Krakow**
Journalist

**Denise Thériault**
Editorial Assistant

**Graphic Design**
Les Oranges bleues inc.

**Distribution**
Ministère de l'Éducation

Québec
Ministère de l'Éducation

13-0000-11A